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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR AND PM

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [IZ](#) [BU](#)

SUBJECT: BULGARIA/IRAQ: POLITICS FORCING MOVE TOWARD EXIT STRATEGY

REF: A) SOFIA 0436 B) SOFIA 0486 C) SOFIA 0067 D) 04
SOFIA 2261 E) 04 SOFIA 2054 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Ambassador James Pardew, reasons, 1.5(B) and (D).

1. (C) SUMMARY. Defense Minister Svinarov's public statement that Bulgaria may pull its troops out of Iraq by year-end is strong evidence that election-year politics are forcing the government to move rapidly toward an exit strategy. Despite Svinarov's comments, no such decision has in fact been made, and debate within the government is still at an early stage. Nevertheless, the death of another Bulgarian soldier last week (ref A) and President Purvanov's subsequent call for "quick but not premature" withdrawal from Iraq (ref B) have clearly spooked the government, which is trailing in the polls three months ahead of parliamentary elections. With two thirds of the population opposed to Bulgaria's presence in the MNF, Sergeant Gurdev's death has made Iraq the dominant political issue in the country, and one which the government is clearly hoping to put behind them. Our goal now is to convince Bulgaria to maintain a battalion-sized capability in the MNF until the conditions set forth in UNSCR 1546 are met and then to transfer as many of these troops as possible to the NATO training mission. END SUMMARY.

2.(C) Well-connected insiders, including Foreign Minister Passy, profess to have been taken by surprise yesterday when, in response to a reporter's question as to whether Bulgaria would withdraw its troops from Iraq by the end of the year, Svinarov said that a report was being prepared for the government on a possible withdrawal. In addition to Passy, two top members of the Prime Minister's parliamentary group and the Minister of Energy also told us today that neither the Prime Minister's party nor the government has made a decision in favor of pulling out of Iraq.

3. (C) Explanations for Svinarov's statement range from benign (he is a loose cannon, he was misquoted) to conspiratorial (he had the tacit blessing of the PM). There may be elements of truth to both interpretations, but the facts as we now know them are as follows: the General Staff has prepared a decision memo for the Defense Council, which is chaired by the President and includes top civilian and military officials but is consultative in nature. Once approved by the National Defense Council, the paper and recommendations will be forwarded to the Council of Ministers, which will develop an official government position. This is likely to happen before the end of the month. Once approved, the government's decision will then be submitted to the National Assembly for a vote before the middle of April.

4. (C) Passy and others who favor a moderate approach expect the government's position to be much "softer" than Svinarov's initial comments would indicate, but no one is willing to predict a continued Bulgarian presence in the MNF beyond 2005. Vladimir Donchev, the chairman of the Parliamentary committee charged with intelligence oversight and a member of the NMSS leadership, believes that the decision to withdraw will be formally linked to UNSCR 1546, the formation of an Iraqi government and the adoption of a constitution, rather than a set date. The effect, however, will likely be the same, since UNSCR 1546 sets a "deadline (in the Bulgarian view) for these events to take place by 31 December 2005. The government's decision is also likely to call for a redefinition of the military mission away from peace enforcement to training of the Iraqi security forces.

5.(C) The government is clearly reacting defensively to the effect of Iraq on domestic politics. The Socialists (BSP), who have called for an immediate withdrawal from Iraq (ref C), hold a 2-1 lead in the polls over the Prime Minister's National Movement Simeon II (NMSS) with the three months to go before elections. The shooting death of Sergeant Gurdev, followed by President Purvanov's speech, seems to have panicked the government, leading to Svinarov's uncoordinated remarks and the current stampede toward a year-end withdrawal. Passy and others are trying to get the process back into normal channels, but the FM's job is made more difficult by the lack of leadership from the top.

6 (C) Prime Minister Saxe-Coburg Goha was conveniently out

of the country when Svinarov spoke out yesterday. More importantly, the PM's entire election campaign appears to be adrift, waiting -- so far in vain -- for him to take the lead. Svinarov and others who reportedly support a quick

withdrawal from Iraq would like to see the issue neutralized before the election. In the absence of any effort by the PM to shift the focus of political discussion from Iraq to the government's many successes in foreign and domestic policy the PM's party is in danger of losing further ground.

17. (C) COMMENT. Bulgarians from the Prime Minister on down have told us repeatedly over the last six months that, absent some concrete economic or political benefits from the Iraq deployment, their position would become untenable as elections approach (refs D-E). With the BSP calling for immediate withdrawal from Iraq and the polls showing the Socialist's lead increasing, at least some members of the government appear to have concluded that no "rewards" will be forthcoming before June 25, and have decided to try to cut their losses. Regardless of the precise contours of the government's upcoming decision, it will be essentially an exit strategy timed to get them out of MNF operations by the end of the year and shift the public debate to issues where they are presumably stronger.

18. (C) The March 25 meeting between the Secretary and FM Passy and the March 29-30 visit to Sofia by Deputy Secretary Zoellick potentially can affect the government's upcoming decision. While acknowledging the pressure faced by the government and the need for an exit strategy, both the Secretary and the Deputy Secretary should urge senior

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Bulgarian officials to tie military capability in Iraq to the approval of the Iraqi constitution, establishment of a parliament and the presence of adequate indigenous security forces, rather than a date certain. Only then should Bulgaria consider shifting the bulk of its forces to the NATO training mission. END COMMENT